

On the Retroactive Gerund Construction : Its  
Semantic Property Needs Considering  
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**On the Retroactive Gerund Construction**  
**—Its Semantic Property Needs Considering—**

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This joint research deals with retroactive gerund constructions (henceforth, RGCs), which are exemplified in the following sentence:

- (1) This car {deserves/needs} repairing.

Sentence (1) is active in form, but passive in meaning, since the understood object of the gerund refers back to the matrix subject, i.e. interpreted retroactively (Hantson (1984), Declark (1991), etc.). Thus, (1) is semantically equivalent to the following sentence using a passive infinitive: *This car {deserves/needs} to be repaired.*

In RGCs, there are two types of predicates: evaluative predicates (e.g. *deserve -ing* and *merit -ing*) and requirement predicates (e.g. *need -ing* and *want -ing*). Previous studies claim that the RGCs of evaluative predicates show different syntactic behavior from those of requirement predicates:

- (2) a. These proposals do not merit working on (\*by the doctors).  
(Safir (1991:102))  
 b. This student needs looking after by a caring parent. (Safir (1991:105))

As seen in (2), *by*-phrases cannot occur in the RGCs of evaluative predicates, while they can in the RGCs of requirement predicates.

Interestingly enough, with the presence of specifiers, *by*-phrases can appear in the RGCs of evaluative predicates:

- (3) a. These proposals merit *some* working on by experts.  
 b. That idea doesn't deserve *any* talking about by serious scholars.  
(Safir (1991:104))  
 (4) My room needs *a thorough* picking up by the janitor. (Clark (1990:27))

As shown in (3), when the pregerundive position of the evaluative predicate is filled with a specifier, such as *some* or *any*, a *by*-phrase can occur. On the other hand, as observed in (4), the syntactic behavior of the requirement predicate does not change, regardless of whether the pregerundive position is filled with a specifier.

The above data seems to suggest that RGCs should be dealt with separately, depending on the type of predicate. There are, however, some examples which show a clear difference in grammaticality from those in previous studies. Take sentence (5) as an example:

- (5) This Ferrari deserves (some) repairing by an engineer.

The sentences in (2b), (4) and (5) indicate that, no matter whether specifiers appear in pregerundive positions, *by*-phrases can occur in the RGCs of both predicates.

Therefore, we should examine under what condition *by*-phrases can occur in the two types of RGCs.

As we mentioned above, RGCs are passive in meaning. It is thus natural to consider that the notional agent of the gerund should be represented with a *by*-phrase, as in (6). However, from the property of the gerund, the notional agent is generally expressed with a genitive, as in (7):

(6) This Ferrari {deserves/needs} repairing by an engineer.

(7) This problem {deserves/needs} an engineer's repairing.

In addition, there are examples in which both *by*-phrases and genitives co-occur in RGCs:

(8) This Ferrari {deserves/needs} an engineer's repairing by Mr. Smith, the professional classic car engineer.

The observation leads us to assume that the notional agents are denoted by either *by*-phrases or genitives.

A closer look, however, reveals that not genitives but *by*-phrases of RGCs denote the true notional agent. Let us consider the following:

(9) a. This Ferrari {deserves/needs} an engineer's repairing.

b. This Ferrari {deserves/needs} repairing in a professional way.

The genitive, *an engineer's*, in (9a) is equivalent to *in a professional way*, in (9b). The adverbial modifier, *in a professional way*, implies the presence of a concrete agent pragmatically, i.e., it evokes repairing which is conducted by a qualified engineer. Here, the genitive is equivalent to the adverbial modifier. Thus, in RGCs, genitives also pragmatically evoke notional agents.

If genitives in RGCs imply notional agents pragmatically, we can expect that *by*-phrases cannot occur unless they have the information value to co-occur. This is supported by the following example:

(10) \* This Ferrari {deserves/needs} an engineer's repairing by a special engineer.

In (10), the genitive, *an engineer's*, easily evokes a special engineer who repairs the car. The *by*-phrase expresses the same notional agent as the genitive implies. Therefore, the phrase, *by a special engineer*, does not have the information value to co-occur with the genitive, *an engineer's*.

To summarize, in the case where *by*-phrases have the information value, it is *by*-phrases, not genitives, that represent the notional agents of RGCs. This means that *by*-phrases can occur in both types of predicates to express the notional agents, if needed. Hence, the occurrence of *by*-phrases does not offer crucial evidence in dealing with RGCs separately.